

## ‘La Carezza Incompuita’

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‘LA CAREZZA INCOMPIUTA’. QUEER AESTHETICS, DESIRE AND CENSORSHIP IN  
TICCHIONI’S *IL SUICIDIO DI UN ESTETA*.<sup>1</sup>

Abstract: *Il suicidio di un esteta*, a novel by the unknown author **Pier Leone Ticchioni**, was censored by the Fascist Regime in 1930 on account of its representation of same-sex desire. Drawing on original archival research, and informed by the thought of Heather Love and Judith Halberstam, the article analyzes the text as an example of **queer failure**. It focusses on the representation of **queer aestheticism**, contextualized in relation to contemporary discourses of homosexuality, and examines the correspondence surrounding the **censorship** of the novel, arguing that Ticchioni’s ‘failure’ nevertheless constitutes a disruptively queer text.

This is the story of a series of failures—queer failures—that linger around the novel on which I focus in this article: *Il suicidio di un esteta* by Pier Leone.<sup>2</sup> First, the novel was never commercially distributed, since within two weeks of printing, in June 1930, it was denounced as offensive and seized by the Fascist authorities; second, the author, whose full name was Pier Leone Ticchioni d’Amelio, appealed against the censorship of his work, but his appeal was rejected; third, the plot of the novel is permeated by failure, specifically the breakdown of the relationship between the protagonists Luciano and Umberto, who never fully consummate their relationship (and thus lament the ‘carezza incompiuta’); fourth, despite

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<sup>1</sup> Research for this article was carried out thanks to an AHRC Early Career Fellowship. Thanks to Dott.ssa Carmela Santoro and Dott.ssa Daniela Ferrari at the Archivio di Stato, Milan, for their help.

<sup>2</sup> Milan: Bottega di Lirica, 1930, hereafter referred to as *SE*.

Ticchioni's dreams of creating a work of art, it is a flawed text; finally, it is a story of the failure of censorship to entirely repress proscribed texts, since without Fascist documentation of censorship, the novel might not have survived until today. I analyse the representation of queer love and desire in the novel and consider its vicissitudes, drawing in particular on the work of Judith Halberstam and Heather Love who have theorized failure as both an abject aspect of queer history with which we must nevertheless engage, and as a form of resistance to heteronormativity.<sup>3</sup> Thus, 'failure' to conform to normative criteria may constitute a sort of triumph.

Ticchioni's novel and the documentation chronicling its censorship have much to tell us about the struggle to represent same-sex desire during Fascism, a field that has only recently begun to receive due critical attention.<sup>4</sup> I argue that the complex interplay of 'success' and 'failure' that characterizes this literary case make it a significant cultural

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward. Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Analyses of literary and media representation of same-sex desire under Fascism include: Francesco Gnerre, *L'eroe negato. Omosessualità e letteratura nel Novecento italiano* (Milan: Baldini&Castoldi, 2000); Claudio Gargano, *Ernesto e gli altri. L'omosessualità nella narrativa italiana del Novecento* (Rome: Riuniti, 2002); Sergio Parussa, 'Reluctantly Queer: In Search of the Homoerotic Novel in Twentieth-Century Italian Fiction', in *Queer Italia. Same-sex Desire in Italian Literature and Film*, ed. by Gary Cestaro (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp.173-86; the chapter on Giovanni Comisso in Derek Duncan's *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality. A Case of Possible Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp.64-82; *Fuori della norma. Storie lesbiche nell'Italia della prima metà del Novecento*, ed. by Nerina Milletti and Luisa Passerini (Milan: Rosenberg and Sellier, 2007); Paola Guazzo, 'Al "confine" della norma. R/esistenze lesbiche e fascismo', in *R/Esistenze lesbiche nell'Europa nazifascista*, ed. by Paola Guazzo, Ines Rieder and Vincenza Scuderi (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2010), pp.104-126; chapters 7-9 of my recent monograph, *Eccentricity and Sameness. Discourses on Lesbianism and Desire between Women in Italy, 1860s-1930s* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), pp.189-266.

document, despite its literary shortcomings and limited distribution. At a textual level, Ticchioni seems to seek both to condemn same-sex desire, and to legitimize it, as contradictory perspectives are interwoven into the narrative right from the opening lines. Moreover, while the novel is rather clichéd and stylistically flawed, it arguably sought to reinforce an emerging dissident male sexual identity; in addition, it offers a political critique of Fascist repression of homosexuality, and gives us a glimpse, albeit fictionalized, of queer subcultural life during this period.

To provide some brief context: Ticchioni is an unknown author, and the details of his biography are barely documented: born in Fabriano (AN) in 1906, he seems to have lived his adult life in Milan. As far as I have been able to determine, his one attempt at publication was only disseminated to or read by a handful of people: these include some of his friends, to whom he circulated copies prior to commercial distribution; a certain Carlo Righetti, who denounced the book to the authorities; and the Fascist censors. I came across this novel serendipitously, while researching literary censorship under Fascism in the Archivio di Stato in Milan.<sup>5</sup> Having spent some time in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome, and realized how little detailed documentation there is on censored literary texts, it struck me as a researcher's treasure trove:<sup>6</sup> the file contained what appears to be a full paper trail of

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<sup>5</sup> All documentation is available in: Prefettura, Gabinetto, 1 versamento, 422, S.f. Libri e opuscoli osceni-antireligiosi, S.s.f. Romanzo 'Il Suicidio di un esteta' di Pier Leone sequestro.

<sup>6</sup> In recent decades and especially since 2007, Fascist censorship has been helpfully documented by scholars including: Philip Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso. Fascismo e mass media* (Bari: Laterza, 1975); Giorgio Fabre, *L'elenco. Censura fascista, editoria e autori ebrei* (Turin: Silvio Zamorani editore, 1988); Nicola Tranfaglia and Albertina Vittoria, *Storia degli editori italiani. Dall'Unità alla fine degli anni Settanta* (Bari: Laterza, 2007); Guido Bonsaver (*Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). As Bonsaver notes (pp.7-8), records for theatrical censorship are more complete than those for literary texts, and some documentation seems to be missing. I did not come across any other examples of

correspondence between the Chief of Police, the Prefect in Milan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Ticchioni, who submitted an appeal when the book was banned from distribution. Moreover, there was a copy of the novel itself, covered in blue and red pencil markings indicating the passages deemed offensive. These documents give us crucial information: they allow us to reconstruct quite precisely the timings and communications involved in this case of censorship; the five-page appeal document reveals Ticchioni's attempt to argue against the suppression of his novel; the annotated copy of the novel—a rarity in the files on censored literature—shows us which passages were highlighted and how 'offensive' texts were marked up; finally, this may be the only surviving copy of *Il suicidio di un esteta*, since most other copies were presumably destroyed. The file has been read by other researchers—for example Lorenzo Benadusi devotes a short paragraph to the novel in his historical study of homosexuality under Fascism<sup>7</sup>—but the case has not yet attracted any substantial attention. Having sketched out these brief details, I turn first to an analysis of the novel, and then consider its censorship.

#### 'UN AMORE AL DI SOPRA DI OGNI TENDENZA E DI OGNI PREGIUDIZIO'?

Ticchioni's tragic tale tells of Luciano Andreis (aged 24) and Umberto Dalla Morte (aged 28), who meet in a café in central Milan and become romantically involved. Luciano comes from a noble family that is in financial difficulty and he therefore works, running a shop selling art, while Umberto has some money from unknown (implicitly nefarious) sources, and is the subject of society gossip. Initially, Luciano and Umberto are caught in a triangular

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annotated censored novels during my research and the files for many authors whose novels were censored are lost.

<sup>7</sup> *Il nemico dell'uomo nuovo. L'omosessualità nell'esperimento totalitario fascista* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005), p.294. Benadusi notes that the book was censored but does not discuss the plot or the censorship process in detail.

relationship with the proprietor of the café, Diana, but they soon realize the depth of their feelings for each other, and rent a 'nido d'amore' in which they can be together. Their ecstasy at having found each other is thwarted by Diana's attempts to blackmail them (in which they are both complicit), by Umberto's jealousy, and by Luciano's waning affection. Umberto attempts to reform his character, breaking ties with his shady former associates and finding regular employment, but does not want to live without Luciano's love and so commits suicide by overdosing on sleeping medication. Luciano watches over Umberto's bedside in hospital as he lies dying, and attends his funeral, stricken at what he has lost. He goes on to have relationships with women, but never loves again as he loved Umberto.

In some ways, the novel resonates with the sensationalist, decadent libertinism depicted by writers like Guido da Verona and Pitigrilli (Dino Segre), whose accounts of courtesans, drug-fuelled orgies and sexual initiation were extremely popular in the previous two decades.<sup>8</sup> Diana has multiple lovers, Umberto has indulged in 'le orgie più torbide' (*SE*, p.160), and both men are seeking sensual pleasure. However, it is a specific kind of pleasure that draws on the decadent and aesthetic traditions popularized in Italy and across Europe by writers like Charles Baudelaire, Gabriele D'Annunzio, and Oscar Wilde. Indeed, aside from the obvious reference to aestheticism and the decadent trope of death in the title, several of Wilde's well-known phrases are cited in translation as epigraphs to the novel: 'Coloro che trovano brutti significati in cose belle sono corrotti senza essere piacevoli, il che è una colpa. [...] Non esistono libri morali o immorali. I libri sono soltanto scritti bene o male' (*SE*, p.7). I will return to these citations in due course, but first I consider the cultural significance of the

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8 Da Verona's novels include *La donna che inventò l'amore* (Milan: Baldini and Castoldi, 1915), and *Sciogli la treccia, Maddalena* (Florence: Bemporad & Figlio, 1920). Pitigrilli's best known works include *Cocaina. Romanzo* (Milan: Mondadori 1982 [1921]) and *Mammiferi di lusso* (Milan: Sonzogno (1925 [1920])).

dandy or 'aesthete' in early twentieth-century Italy, and analyze the type of queer aestheticism embodied by Luciano and Umberto.

In Fascist Italy, the figure of the dandy was decidedly overshadowed by the cult of the militaristic, virile 'uomo nuovo',<sup>9</sup> but was not entirely eclipsed; indeed, it developed multiple meanings. The dandy was associated with D'Annunzio (himself, paradoxically, also a proponent of virile masculinity<sup>10</sup>), as well as with urban leisure, and, more subversively, with sexual dissidence.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, dandyism was understood by many as a style, not an essence. As a result, for some men, the 'mask' of the dandy provided a way both to embody a non-normative gender and sexual identity, and to escape detection, since it was 'only' a pose.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the link between the dandy, or 'esteta' and homosexuality in early twentieth century Italy was fairly well-established.

The aesthete in particular was strongly associated with Wilde, often in a homophobic manner. Most Italian critics downplayed Wilde's sexual dissidence, but more direct, negative references to his sexuality were made by scientists or sociologists;<sup>13</sup> they often used the term 'aestheticism' as a euphemism for the 'unspeakable' vice of homosexuality. For example, in 1909 the journalist, sociologist and novelist Paolo Valera published an account of a scandalous trial in Milan, involving aristocrats, firefighters and accusations of sexual

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<sup>9</sup> Benadusi, pp.31-34.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities. Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp.1-33.

<sup>11</sup> John Champagne, *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp.76-77.

<sup>12</sup> Champagne, p.77.

<sup>13</sup> Elisa Bizzotto, "Children of Pleasure". Oscar Wilde and Italian Decadence, in *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*, ed. by Stefano Evangelista (London: Continuum, 2010), pp.124-40 (pp.132-33).

inversion, which he linked to Wilde's trial in the UK.<sup>14</sup> Valera proclaimed: 'L'oscarwildismo è la religione degli invertiti. Non è una malattia di certi uomini o di certi degenerati, come molti suppongono. È dell'estetismo di certe classi'.<sup>15</sup> He asserted that already in 1909 'l'oscarwildismo' had significant influence in the city, where 'l'estetismo ha sedotto molti e molti non lo considerano nemmeno come vizio ributtante'.<sup>16</sup> Valera proclaims himself horrified by this development.

Valera cements the link between bourgeois aestheticism and sexual 'inversion', coining the term 'oscarwildismo' as a euphemism for homosexuality, which is linked to a particular style, class and embodiment of gender.<sup>17</sup> His scandalized response to the apparent social acceptability of homosexuality is exaggerated, although it does imply the existence of a Milanese subculture in which same-sex desire could be relatively openly articulated. Under the Fascist regime homosexuality was not specifically proscribed; indeed an article criminalizing homosexuality was excluded from the final text of the 1930 Rocco penal code on the grounds that mentioning such problems risked spreading them and that the 'vice' was,

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<sup>14</sup> *I gentiluomini invertiti* (Milan: Floritta, 1909).

<sup>15</sup> This chapter was later included in updated editions of Valera's popular text, *Milano sconosciuta: rinnovata: arricchita di altri scandali polizieschi e postribolari*, ed. by Attilio Mangano (Milan: Greco & Greco Editori, 2000), p.31.

<sup>16</sup> Valera, p.33.

<sup>17</sup> The term 'invertito' [invert] derived from the notion of sexual inversion developed by the German neurologist and psychiatrist Carl Westphal in his 1869 essay 'Die conträre Sexualempfindung: Symptom eines neuropathischen (psychopathischen) Zustandes' (*Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten*, 2, pp.73–108). Westphal's theories were disseminated in Italy by the forensic doctor Arrigo Tamassia, who elaborated on Westphal's notion of inversion as a degenerative, psychopathic state caused by the feeling that an individual's psychological gender differed from their bodily sex and the consequent inversion of the sexual instinct towards members of the same sex ('Sull'inversione dell'istinto sessuale', *Rivista sperimentale di freniatria e di medicina legale*. Reggio Emilia: Stefano Calderini, 4, 1878, p.97–117).



Ministers argued, less diffuse in Italy than elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> However, the police were given free rein to prosecute those suspected of indulging in this ‘vice’, including through imprisonment.<sup>19</sup> Same-sex desire and non-normative masculinity were rarely openly discussed in the media, but some key publications continued to stigmatize transgressive embodiment and sexualities, at times reinforcing the existing link between aestheticism and homosexuality. For example, in the late 1920s Leo Longanesi’s satirical magazine *L’Italiano* took homophobic aim at Wilde as an ‘effeminate’ icon of a ‘perverse’ sexuality, proclaiming: ‘l’omosessualità è un’estetica’.<sup>20</sup>

Arguably, Ticchioni’s title deliberately draws on this association of aestheticism with dissident sexuality; what is not clear is whether he is seeking to further condemn the aesthete or to rehabilitate him. In the novel, the aesthetic performance of bourgeois queer masculinity is clearly described.<sup>21</sup> Luciano is a stereotypical dandy; he dresses with flamboyance, wearing brightly coloured shirts, silk handkerchiefs and narrow shoes that emphasize his slim feet (*SE*, p.98). He is elegant and decidedly out of the ordinary: ‘nato per l’amore’, he has a ‘bocca strana, sensualissima, perversa’; he is ‘ambiguo’ and is passionate about the theatre, luxury and beauty (*SE*, pp.17-20). Luciano performs with a small theatre company, revelling

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<sup>18</sup> Benadusi, pp.106-115.

<sup>19</sup> Some suspected ‘pederasti’ (a term used frequently by the Regime) were incarcerated or sent into ‘confino’. This punishment was already in use prior to Fascism, but became more widely applied, especially in specific cities (e.g. Catania). See Benadusi, pp.116, 139-70.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Considerazioni di un fascista povero’ (1928), cited in Dario Petrosino ‘Come si costruisce uno stereotipo. La rappresentazione degli omosessuali ne *L’Italiano* di Leo Longanesi (1926-1929)’, in *Le ragioni di un silenzio. La persecuzione degli omosessuali durante il nazismo e il fascismo*, ed. by Circolo Pink (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2002), pp.49-63 (p.53).

<sup>21</sup> While Umberto seems to come from a lower social background to Luciano, the fact that Luciano has to work to support his family lessens the gap between them. They both aspire towards and seek to embody a decidedly bourgeois queer masculinity.

in the attention this brings, but provoking Umberto's jealousy. Umberto Dalla Morte, whose very name associates him rather unsubtly with death, has a tragic, ghostly aspect and is a tormented soul, but is also described as highly sensuous, with a small mouth that is 'fatto per i baci' (*SE*, pp.28-29). He has a dubious past, having apparently participated in mysterious 'episodi di bassezze innominabili, di degenerazioni ignobili, di torbide nefandezze' (*SE*, p.30). The gender dynamics between the couple are transgressive, although, like the heavy-handed symbolism of Umberto's surname, they lack nuance and seem rather obviously contrived. Luciano's surname, Andreis, evokes the Greek word 'andro' meaning 'male', yet he takes on a more 'feminine' role: he admires Umberto's virility (*SE*, p.38); he is spoiled by the extravagant bouquets of flowers that Umberto buys for him, and sits on Umberto's lap 'con leggerezza feminea' (*SE*, p.113). His extravagant theatricality and love of beautiful scarves and upholstery are highly camp, rendering him almost a caricature. Umberto too is ambiguous, since aside from his more 'masculine' aspects, he has a particularly seductive, queer mouth that recalls both a woman's lips and female genitalia: 'formava il disegno perfetto di due labbra femminili, arcuate nella foggia di un cuore' (*SE*, p.51).<sup>22</sup> This evocation of embodied femininity may have been intended to diminish the perceived gulf between male and female physiognomies, making desire for another man somehow more understandable since these lips might perhaps remind the reader of Diana, with whom both men have sexual relations during the course of the novel. However there also seems to be a fetishization of queer gender performance and embodiment that disturbs the dominant binary model. The delicate, kissable lips of both protagonists are emphasized in the cover image of

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<sup>22</sup> Ticchioni's image evokes Luce Irigaray's description of the two lips in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977). For Irigaray, the two lips connote much more than female biology, as discussed by Margaret Whitford in her article 'Irigaray's Body Symbolic' (*Hypatia* 6(3), 1991: 97-110), although the allusion here seems predominantly sexual.

the novel, by Gino Galbiati. This illustration also references Umberto's death in the paler face, seen in profile, and theatrical masks or make-up in the dark-rimmed eyes of the other front-facing visage (Fig. 1).<sup>23</sup>

The dandyism embodied here is distinctly Wildean and Baudelairean, as both protagonists are fading rather than ascending; 'at once aristocratic in their bearing, and yet in jeopardy of losing their reputations'.<sup>24</sup> Yet unlike the celebrated dandy Wilde, whose texts hinted at coded homosexual desire,<sup>25</sup> or the writer and painter Filippo De Pisis, whose canvases were subtly infused with homoeroticism,<sup>26</sup> Ticchioni's dandies are directly pathologized through the language of sexual condemnation. The novel echoes terminology and concepts elaborated by the influential positivist scientist Cesare Lombroso in his influential bio-medical theories on same-sex desire. Lombroso linked sexual 'deviance' to criminality, effeminacy, illness and degeneration, and characterized it as a pathology.<sup>27</sup> He developed and popularized theories of sexual 'vice' as resulting from a congenital condition, positing physiological origins for dissident desire.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Ticchioni roots same-sex desire in physiological features, depicting his characters as both posing dandies and as

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<sup>23</sup> Both this and Fig. 2 appear by kind permission of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England. Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (New York: Columbia University Press), p.37.

<sup>25</sup> Bristow, p.36.

<sup>26</sup> Champagne, pp.76-86.

<sup>27</sup> Lombroso's key publications on male same-sex desire include *L'uomo delinquente studiato in rapporto all'antropologia, alla medicina legale ed alle discipline carcerarie* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1876), 'L'amore nei pazzi', *Archivio di psichiatria antropologia criminale e scienze penali*, vol 2. 1881, 1-32. See the discussion of Lombroso's theories of male and female sexual inversion in Chiara Beccalossi, *Female Sexual Inversion. Same-Sex Desires in Italian and British Sexology, c.1870-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.123-40.

<sup>28</sup> Lombroso, 'L'amore nei pazzi', p.27.

distinct sexual ‘others’. Indeed, on one level, his work exemplifies Michel Foucault’s comments on the nineteenth-century discursive creation of the homosexual as a ‘subspecies’: ‘a life form, and a morphology’ whose sexuality was ‘written immodestly on his face and body’.<sup>29</sup> However, ironically, neither Umberto nor Luciano conform straightforwardly to the notion of the homosexual as subspecies, since they both engage in bisexual behaviour, and do not consummate their own sexually-charged bond. Their queerness derives in part from the fact that their presentations of self are patently ‘at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant’<sup>30</sup> while also disturbing the stereotypes of the homosexual or aesthete that their embodiment evokes: they (‘can’t be made) to signify monolithically’.<sup>31</sup>

Luciano and Umberto’s desire for each other is experienced and expressed through a clichéd form of decadence—a heady mixture of ‘sumptuousness and demise’<sup>32</sup>—tempered with aesthetic Platonism: a philosophy popularized in late nineteenth-century, for example in the work of Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds and Oscar Wilde. Through their re-readings of Plato’s works, especially his *Symposium*, these writers revalorized his conception of eros, emancipating the love of men and linking it to high culture and a ‘superior’ sensibility.<sup>33</sup> Ticchioni’s text does not contain specific references to classical poetry, but does feature homoerotic adolescent males, beauty, luxury, a fascination with death, delusions of grandeur, and allusions to Greek statues. The protagonists might be read as performing a

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality Volume 1*. Trans Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), p.43.

<sup>30</sup> David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.62.

<sup>31</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p.8. Original emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen, ‘Introduction: The Empire at the End of Decadence’, in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Härmänmaa and Nissen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp.1-16 (p.1).

<sup>33</sup> Stefano Evangelisti, ‘Lovers and Philosophers at Once’: Aesthetic Platonism in the Victorian ‘Fin de Siècle’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 36, 2 (2006), 230-244 (pp.231, 243).

knowing parody of decadent Platonic aestheticism. In several scenes, Luciano is in playful or seductive mode in his silk pyjamas, luxuriating in their opulently decorated ‘nido d’amore’, revealing tantalizing glimpses of his ‘collo bianchissimo’, his chest that is ‘candido’, or his ‘nivea purezza’ under the soft fabric (*SE*, p.120). Umberto has a ‘visione splendidamente estetica’ of living with Luciano in a tower that rises above the city, with a magnificent view, surrounded by luxurious furnishing and statues (*SE*, pp.105-06). He is delighted when he discovers that Luciano was painted as an adolescent, nude in a reclining pose. He acquires the portrait from Luciano’s uncle and hangs it in their ‘love nest’ framed by two vases of white roses, as a sort of altarpiece to male beauty (*SE*, p.116-17). The aestheticism that we read of here is infused with homoeroticism and pleasure, with ‘art for art’s sake’, and with the search for a ‘superior’ kind of relationship, as the protagonists revel ‘nell’esaltazione d’elevarsi, nel desiderio di raffinarsi’ (*SE*, p.154).

Of course, according to aesthetic Platonism, while homoerotic desire was cultivated, men were supposed to remain ‘philosophical lovers’ rather than engaging in physical intercourse.<sup>34</sup> Aside from the sexological terminology that alerts the reader to the presence of non-normative desire (references to ‘perversion’ and ‘degeneration’, for example), Umberto and Luciano do express sexual desire for one another: Luciano longs for ‘una carezza tenue e rude nell’istesso tempo’ (*SE*, p.64) and for ‘amore più intimo’. They also kiss passionately, including in public, at the central train station in Milan (*SE*, p.79). However they do not progress beyond this limited physical contact. One afternoon, Umberto is overcome by desire for Luciano: ‘reso brutale dal desiderio profondo e atroce, gettò un grido rauco da selvaggio, e si lanciò su Luciano per stringerlo, per rovesciarlo, per profanarlo con la sua bramosia...’ (*SE*, p.120). With some difficulty, he manages to control himself, to their shared relief: ‘avevano rischiato [...] di profanare il loro grande, altissimo amore in un’orgia lubrica ed

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<sup>34</sup> Evangelista, p.238.

arida' (*SE*, p.121). Thereafter, the love that they share is described as 'puro' (*SE*, p.192), and as a 'relazione intima d'anime' (*SE*, p.154).

Umberto and Luciano's sexual restraint, alongside their palpable physical desire, disrupt sexual categories of 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality'. The juxtaposition of this 'superior' love between souls with the sexual frustration that permeates the novel, and the palpable fear of plummeting into an abyss of 'depravity', complicate Ticchioni's depiction of homoeroticism, evoking questions of success and failure. Umberto's ability to resist his physical desire is ostensibly framed as the 'correct' behaviour, as he and Luciano restrict themselves to an 'acceptable' degree of homoerotic licence.<sup>35</sup> Yet this self-imposed limit may have contributed to the breakdown of their relationship, leaving Umberto lamenting the 'carezza incompiuta' (*SE*, p.147), and Luciano filled with regret for having rejected Umberto's love (*SE*, p.191). While there may have been queer subcultures in Milan at this time, the dominant culture was nevertheless hostile to same-sex desire, influenced by the work of Lombroso and others. This may have played a part in the sexual limitations imposed by both men, and in the failure of the relationship. Umberto and Luciano are affected by the indirect criminalization of homosexuality which impacts on their lives through the lingering threat of blackmail or discovery, and through a pervasive sense of homosexuality as a 'social impossibility'.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, they are not prosecuted by the authorities, but rather repress themselves. They cannot be held up as examples of 'plucky queer [...] heroic freedom fighter[s] in a world of puritans', who live out their passions to the full and risk punishment.

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<sup>35</sup> If aesthetic Platonism celebrated eros, it did not go so far as to celebrate same-sex practices (at least not openly), as reinforced by Wilde's admission of love for men, and denial of his involvement in 'sodomy and unnatural crimes' during his 1895 trial. See Merlin Holland, *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess. The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (London and New York: Fourth Estate), p.214.

<sup>36</sup> Love, p.51.

Instead they are partially complicit in their own oppression;<sup>37</sup> to some degree, they orchestrate their own failure.

What are we to make of Ticchioni's representation of same-sex love? On one level, it is decidedly problematic: the figure of the aesthete is linked to death and abjection from the outset; the protagonists' struggle to refrain from 'unnatural' acts seems futile, due to the pathologization of their very physiologies even before they begin interacting erotically, and the condemnation of homosexuality resonates with contemporary Catholic teachings to repress same-sex desire.<sup>38</sup> However, I suggest that Ticchioni's work cannot be reduced to a straightforwardly homophobic text. Instead I argue that he deliberately and decadently evoked a 'tainted' aesthetics of failure, and chose to revel in the representation of an intense but ill-fated love affair. While Umberto and Luciano were destined never to achieve their 'irrealizzabile avvenire felice' (*SE*, p.150), their story is permeated by what *might have been*; interwoven into the narrative of their failed relationship is the tantalizing phantasm of the happiness and erotic satisfaction that they glimpsed, and which seems to live on beyond Umberto's death. As I show, this is achieved through a narrative strategy of combining contradictory discourses so that while Ticchioni ostensibly criticizes the queer aesthete, he is also simultaneously effecting a partial redemption. The novel reinforces and partially resignifies a model of queer embodiment and desire, making it 'narrativizable'—a quality which Judith Butler has suggested is fundamental to liveability.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, Ticchioni's prose does more than merely condemn his protagonists; while the novel is peppered with scientific discourses on sexual 'degeneracy', they are blended together

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<sup>37</sup> Halberstam, p.150.

<sup>38</sup> The Vatican, *Catechismo della Chiesa Cattolica*, Parte Terza, La vita in Cristo, Sezione seconda, I dieci comandamenti, 2357-9. Available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism\\_it/p3s2c2a6\\_it.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism_it/p3s2c2a6_it.htm)

<sup>39</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p.43.

with Platonic hymns to ‘philosophical’ (and not so ‘philosophical’) male love, weaving a more radical subtext into the narrative. This is clearly exemplified in the foreword to the novel, signed by ‘L’editore’, but possibly authored by Ticchioni himself in a bid to give some ‘objective’ authority to his work. We hear that the novel is full of ‘scabrose’ ideas about ‘perversità’, and same-sex desire is framed as an illness to which anyone might succumb (*SE*, pp.5-6). This echoes Lombroso’s theory that sexual ‘crimes’ were not only caused by a congenital ‘abnormality’, but could be triggered by context.<sup>40</sup> However, in the same foreword we also hear that the text depicts ‘bellezze’ and the protagonists are described as ‘due amanti dell’amore’ (*SE*, pp.5-6). Moreover, the foreword explicitly appeals to the reader’s ability to interpret the text ‘correctly’: ‘L’osservatore intelligente, il lettore appassionato vi sapranno trovare tutte le bellezze e tutte le malinconie che solamente un amore al di sopra di ogni tendenza e di ogni pregiudizio sa comunicare’ (*SE*, p.5). Coupled with the citations from Wilde that appear immediately after the foreword, criticizing those who find ugly meanings in art as corrupt, this comment seems intended to construct a queer readership that is prepared to use ‘oppositional’ strategies to go ‘against the grain’ of the text, revealing a dissident narrative.<sup>41</sup> Here, rather than the default heteronormative reader, the ideal reader of this text is implicitly of a queer sensibility.<sup>42</sup> Arguably, this technique encourages readers to see Umberto and Luciano as something more than clichéd parodies, and lends a knowing, ironic edge to the writing.

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<sup>40</sup> Beccalossi, p.125.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander Dhoest and Nele Simons, ‘Questioning Queer Audiences. Exploring Diversity in Lesbian and Gay Men’s Media Uses and Readings’, *Handbook of Gender, Sex and Media*, ed. by Karen Ross (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), pp.260-76 (p.262).

<sup>42</sup> On the ideal reader, see, for example, Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).



Moving forward in the narrative, Ticchioni again interweaves condemnation of homoeroticism with positive queer messages as Luciano struggles to come to terms with his desire for Umberto. First he falls into a ‘stato patologico di ipersensibilità’ (*SE*, p.41), an implicitly degenerative state of polymorphous desire. He then grapples with a bold new feeling that provokes self-loathing as he is aware that this is considered a ‘passione anormale’ (*SE*, pp.46-7). Finally he feels altered, and embraces the possibility of reconstructing himself anew: ‘Sento di vivere un periodo di rinascita’ (*SE*, p.71). Luciano and Umberto are on an emotional roller coaster. One minute Luciano is overwhelmed by doubt about whether he can still be considered a ‘man’, given that he loves another man. Here Ticchioni again evokes sexological categories of sexual inversion, and the notion of male homosexuals as effeminate, or ‘mezzi uomini’ as discussed in the work of the best-selling popular scientist Paolo Mantegazza, for example.<sup>43</sup> Yet soon afterwards, the protagonists are giddy with joy, ‘ebberi della stranissima musica che saliva dai loro cuori’ (*SE*, p.102).

Ticchioni’s prose is destabilizing, oscillating between condemnation and libertinism; yet arguably this strategy reproduces for the reader the experiences of coming to terms with queer sexuality and desire, which often involves grappling with feelings of shame and disgust derived from internalized homophobia, as well as elation at having discovered others who share and reciprocate dissident desires.<sup>44</sup> The advice offered in the foreword confirms that,

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<sup>43</sup> See *SE*, p.95 and Mantegazza, *Fisiologia dell’amore*. Sesto San Giovanni: Casa Editrice Madella, 1916 [1872]), p.211. Mantegazza’s works sold by the hundreds of thousand and were republished many times in the early twentieth century. See Paola Govoni, ‘Dalla scienza popolare alla divulgazione. Scienziati e pubblico in età liberale’, in *Storia d’Italia. Annali 26. Scienze e cultura dell’Italia unita*, ed. by Francesco Cassata and Claudio Pogliano (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), pp.65-82 (p.72).

<sup>44</sup> On the complex process of coming out, see, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), and Diana Fuss, ‘Introduction’ in *Inside/Out. Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp.1-10.

despite the moralism, the novel has a progressive agenda: 'Le pagine di questo libro [...] che potrebbero dare al lettore superficiale un senso di rivolta e di ripugnanza, sono invece coraggiose pagine di verità e di umanità' (*SE*, p.5). Here homophobia is equated with superficiality and the reader is challenged to see beyond the banal condemnation of same-sex love.

Moreover, there are further progressive elements in the text that add a distinctly political dimension and render it more than a two-dimensional caricature of queer aesthetes. While the section of the plot relating to blackmail, as a result of both gossip and the protagonists' love letters getting into the wrong hands, is rather contorted, it sounds a note of realistic alarm, emphasizing the risks that the protagonists were running. The fear of discovery by the authorities is palpable, particularly poignantly so after Umberto's death, when Luciano returns, bereft, to the boarding house where his former 'friend' had been living, and disposes of all the compromising artefacts therein. These include letters and silk pyjamas as well as other items that had not been mentioned until this point: erotica, and make-up. Luciano ceremoniously burns this evidence of a flamboyant queer life, and in so doing, 'dette alla stanza un'ordine freddo, rigido, perfetto, normale' (*SE*, p.177). He has acted not a moment too soon, since as he leaves, he sees a government agent on his way to investigate the suicide. This destruction of the traces of a queer life both cancels out Umberto's closeted self, protecting him from posthumous scandal, and, paradoxically, reveals aspects of his life hitherto unknown to us, but only alluded to, through references to his involvement in 'orgie'. The burnt items are tantalizingly present and then immediately expunged, as the text reveals that while it may seem to offer an explicit account of this relationship, many details of Umberto's life, at least, have been omitted; the text knows more than it is telling us, but invites the astute reader to be aware of this. This moment marks a return to 'normalcy' through a critique of socio-cultural discipline; the destroyed queer

paraphernalia is ever so much more alive that the dull order to which the room is returned. Luciano's efficiency reveals the level of risk he knew Umberto to be running, and seems motivated by love and an urge to protect, rather than by shame. Indeed, he laments the indignity of Umberto's death and burial, especially the fact that his body is kept in a communal morgue and there is no possibility of a vigil (*SE*, p.179). Thus Ticchioni also criticizes the treatment of suicides.

At the close of the novel, Umberto and Luciano are separated, and their imagined happy future can no longer come to pass. Nevertheless, drawing on Love and Foucault, we can discern a palpable eros of retrospect in the 'carezza incompiuta' which Umberto describes in his suicide note, and which reverberates in Luciano's mind as he reflects on what might have been.<sup>45</sup> Foucault conjures an image of a lover as he leaves, implying that queer love is always already receding, and can be more desirable when it is ungraspable. In Ticchioni's text, love and longing are intrinsically linked to loss and impossibility, but the erotic charge of the caress seems to have been merely deferred, as the fantasy of the unfinished touch lingers on, beyond the action of the novel, far stronger than any of Luciano's subsequent heterosexual encounters. So their 'success' in repressing their sexual desires leads to the 'failure' of the relationship, but thanks to Ticchioni's double-edged prose, the narrative is not merely bleak, and same-sex desire retains a strong charge even in the closing lines. As Halberstam observes, queer failure certainly brings negative affects—such as the loneliness and disappointment with which Umberto struggles—but it also enables individuals to escape socio-cultural discipline and 'to poke holes' in the relentless façade of everyday heteronormativity.<sup>46</sup> If queer aestheticism was a pose, a masquerade, so is the

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<sup>45</sup> Love, p.51; Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. by Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan et al. (New York: Routledge, 1988), p.297.

<sup>46</sup> Halberstam, p.3.

‘ordine freddo, rigido, perfetto’ of ‘normal’ life (SE, p.117). Tragically, it is this cold, heterosexual self that Luciano will perform from now on, with no hope of further queer evasion.

Before turning to the censorship of the novel, it is worth briefly contextualizing Ticchioni’s novel in relation to other Italian and European authors who represented desire between men in the early twentieth century. As Francesco Gnerre has documented, several Italian authors wrote about homoeroticism and same-sex desire between men in the early twentieth century, but many works were not published, or the erotic charge was condemned, or projected onto female characters, with the result that they contributed in some way to an ‘antihomosexual’ discourse.<sup>47</sup> Examples include: Aldo Palazzeschi’s 1921 story ‘Il re bello, in which a king’s daughter is brought up as male to be the next king, and expresses ‘his’ desire for male soldiers;<sup>48</sup> Giovanni Comisso’s *Il delitto di Fausto Diamante* (1933) which includes an explicitly homosexual character, portrayed in a negative light, who is eventually killed by the protagonist.<sup>49</sup> More positively, Comisso’s *Gioco d’infanzia*, depicts adult homoeroticism as a deeply fulfilling continuation of an attraction that began in adolescence, rather than dismissing same-sex desire as a mere (problematic) adolescent phase. However, this text, written in the early 1930s, was only published in 1965.<sup>50</sup>

The Italian text which resonates most strongly with Ticchioni’s novel is perhaps Palazzeschi’s *:riflessi*, which first appeared in 1908.<sup>51</sup> This two part novel begins with an epistolary section comprising the letters written by Prince Valentino Kore (aged 29) from his

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<sup>47</sup> Gnerre, p.19.

<sup>48</sup> *Il re bello*, ed. by Rita Guerricchio (Milan: La vita felice, 1995); Gnerre, pp.70-72.

<sup>49</sup> *Il delitto di Fausto Diamante* (Milan: Ceschina, 1933); Gnerre, pp.124-25.

<sup>50</sup> *Gioco d’infanzia* (Parma: Guanda, 1994); Gnerre, pp.128-32. On Comisso’s work see also Gargano, pp.55-61 and Duncan, pp.64-82.

<sup>51</sup> *:riflessi* (Milan: SE, 1990 [1908]). See Gnerre’s discussion, pp.62-65.

villa in the Tuscan hills, to his English ‘friend’ Johnny Mare (aged 20), who is in Venice. We learn that Valentino’s mother, Maria, committed suicide in the villa, and Valentino seems to be preparing his own death, but then he disappears, mysteriously. The second part of the novel consists of a fragmented series of press reports speculating on what might have happened, which become increasingly fantastic. As Dario Trento has pointed out, Valentino’s letters are dripping with the tropes of decadence—a devotion to beauty, particularly Hellenic statues (to which Johnny is compared), opulent furnishings in a villa that resembles a museum, and a dwindling aristocratic line—echoing works by D’Annunzio, Thomas Mann, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Johann Joachim Winckelmann.<sup>52</sup> However, the second part of the novel moves beyond this aesthetic, into comic effect and parody (Trento, p.28). Valentino is a narcissist, who becomes lost in a series of superficial speculations, so that it is difficult to feel grief at his disappearance.

Ticchioni’s prose also arguably tips into parody, but seems to have a critical self-consciousness of queer decadence and aestheticism as a playful, assumed identity. Moreover, in contrast to Valentino’s retrospective, veiled monologue, Ticchioni’s novel shows us the evolving relationship between Umberto and Luciano, and is much more explicit about the sentimental and physical bond between them; their grief in losing one another is not diluted by comedy. Looking beyond Italy, Ticchioni dramatizes a similar dilemma to that experienced by Maurice in E. M. Forster’s eponymous novel: inspired by reading Plato’s *Symposium*, Maurice seeks not only spiritual and emotional love with another man, but also physical intimacy. He is rejected by his first love, Clive Durham, on the grounds that sexual intercourse is a step too far, but eventually finds what he is looking for with the gardener

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<sup>52</sup> Dario Trento, ‘La prima mutazione di Palazzeschi, :*riflessi*, *Quaderni di critica omosessuale* (Il Cassero, Bologna), 4 (1998), 5-35 (pp.17-18).

Alec Scudder.<sup>53</sup> Unusually, the novel has a happy ending, as Maurice and Alec look forward to a life together as a couple. Of course, while *Maurice* was written in 1914, it was only published in 1971, since Forster believed it to be unpublishable.<sup>54</sup> Ticchioni may not have been bold enough to narrate the ‘impossible’ happy future which Umberto could only imagine, but he was convinced that his novel was publishable, and was prepared to defend his right to disseminate the text.

#### ENFORCING THE ‘SANI PRINCIPI D’ORDINE MORALE’

Textual representations of same-sex desire had already been subject to censorship for several decades, under article 339 of the 1889 Zanardelli Code, which imposed a fine and potential prison term for anyone caught creating and/or distributing texts and images that were deemed ‘osceni’ or offensive to ‘il pudore’.<sup>55</sup> These terms were interpreted in a variety of ways, and several authors defended their work by insisting on the moral message embedded in their text.<sup>56</sup> Accusations of obscenity tended to remain quite vague, usually referring to unqualified ‘pornografia’, rather than specifically singling out homosexuality, for example.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> London: Arnold, 1971.

<sup>54</sup> For a critical reflection on the reception of the novel see Matthew Curr, ‘Recuperating E. M. Forster’s *Maurice*. *MLQ*, 62, 1 (2001), 53-69.

<sup>55</sup> *Codice penale e di procedura penale*, ed. by Luigi Franchi (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1908), p.57.

<sup>56</sup> One example is Umberto Notari who defended his 1904 novel *Quelle signore* on the grounds that despite its representation of sexual acts, it conveyed a moral message about the importance of motherhood. See Notari, *Quelle signore. (Scene di una grande città moderna). Romanzo sequestrato e processato per oltraggio al pudore. Assolto per inesistenza di reato (sentenza 23 Giugno 1906, Regio Tribunale Penale di Parma)*. (Milan: Lito-Tipografia Lombarda, 1907 [1904]).

<sup>57</sup> This is the case for the dozens of letters denouncing ‘obscene’ publications, and the related ministerial correspondence, for the years 1913-15. These documents are held in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS): MI DGPS PG 1913-15 B. 152: f. Pubblicazioni oscene.

Under Fascism, the category of ‘obscenity’ continued to be applied without much qualification, but the vocabulary of condemnation evolved somewhat; the offence was still to ‘pudore’, but also to the ‘race’ and the nation. 1920s Italy witnessed some progressive developments in debates on sexuality, most significantly Aldo Mieli’s *Rassegna di Studi Sessuali*, founded in 1921. This journal disseminated the work of the progressive German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, among others, and published a range of articles, including some that insisted that homosexuality was simply different, not ‘perverted’, and called for an end to persecution on the basis of sexuality.<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, as critics have noted, this radical publication was effectively silenced by the Fascist regime as Mieli fled to France and the journal became a mouthpiece for Fascist ideas.<sup>59</sup> When Ticchioni was writing, Fascist censorship had not yet reached its peak. Mussolini began to be directly involved in individual cases in the 1930s, and practices were significantly tightened up in 1934, when publishers were ordered to send three copies of every new publication to the prefect, who would keep one, and forward the other copies to the General Directorate of Public Security and the Press Office in Rome.<sup>60</sup> However many authors were not aware of these developments at the time; some felt that the early 1930s was a pivotal moment in which the taboo on homosexuality was both growing stronger and remained open to being breached.

This sentiment is captured in a letter from Umberto Saba to Sandro Penna in 1932, which urged some caution in publishing texts with a homoerotic theme, but nevertheless acknowledged that there had been some progressive developments: ‘Trent’anni fa, la gente

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<sup>58</sup> See Carola Susani ‘Una critica della norma nell’Italia del Fascismo’, in *La parole e la storia. Ricerche su omosessualità e cultura. Quaderni di critica omosessuale*, ed. by Enrico Venturelli (Bologna: Il Cassero), 9 (1991), 110-19. This article also discusses the series of pamphlets published by Edoardo Tinto as the ‘Biblioteca dei Curiosi’, which republished some articles from Mieli’s *Rassegna* after it folded.

<sup>59</sup> Benadusi, p.84.

<sup>60</sup> Bonsaver, pp.62, 99-101.

non ci avrebbe pensato, ma oggi, dopo tanto che si è parlato, scritto e studiato, la gente è più scaltra. Ma, al tempo stesso, sono cadute molte inibizioni'.<sup>61</sup> In Saba's view, sexological debates and societal changes had made it both more possible and riskier to express sexual dissidence. Certainly, the boundaries between acceptable representation of sexuality and 'obscenity' were porous and shifting in this period, but as time went on many more texts were banned. For example, sexological studies, which included sections on homosexuality, among other phenomena, were initially not censored. In 1931 a telegram was issued by the Chief of Police Arturo Bocchini to the Prefect of Milan confirming that Richard von Krafft-Ebing's influential sexological study *Psychopathia sexualis* was a scientific text, and therefore was exempt from seizure.<sup>62</sup> Later, several scientific works by Cesare Lombroso and Paolo Mantegazza were censored, and appear on the 1939 'Elenco delle stampe sequestrate'.<sup>63</sup> Lombroso was Jewish, which may have motivated the censorship, but Mantegazza was not.

Yet while it became more stringent, censorship was not a watertight process, and some 'obscene' texts continued to circulate even after having been proscribed. One example is the Italian translation of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, which was banned in

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<sup>61</sup> *Lettere a Sandro Penna 1929-1940*, ed. Roberto Deidier (Milan: Archinto, 1997), pp.5-6.

<sup>62</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia sexualis: eine klinisch-forensische Studie*, Enke, Stuttgart 1886. The first Italian translation appeared in 1889: *Le psicopatie sessuali con speciale considerazione alla inversione sessuale* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca). This telegram probably refers to the 1931 translation by Piero Giolla, *Psychopathis sexualis: con particulate riguardo alla sensibilità sessuale invertita* (Milan: Schor), based on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> editions that were revised by Albert Moll in 1924. The telegram is held in the Archivio di Stato, Milan: Prefettura, Gabinetto, 1 versamento, 422, S.f. Libri e opuscoli osceni-antireligiosi.

<sup>63</sup> All lists of banned books are available in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato: MI, DAGR, DGPS Massime S4/A, b.219, f. 3 Disciplina della stampa quotidiana e periodica / s.f.4 Giornali e periodici. Reclame illecita.



England in 1928.<sup>64</sup> Despite appearing on the 1935 list of proscribed texts, translations were still available in bookshops in 1938.<sup>65</sup> Strikingly, the editors of the Italian translation of Radclyffe Hall's novel used a similar formula to Ticchioni in their defence of the work, anticipating accusations of obscenity. They insist that they have decided to publish the book 'per la sua singolare potenza artistica [...] senza menomamente preoccuparci del suo scabroso conturbante tema'.<sup>66</sup> The foreword to Ticchioni's novel similarly notes its 'pagine [...] scabrose' but goes on to praise its 'lirismo acuto ed alato' (*SE*, p.5). This defence was not sufficient to redeem either text, in the censors' eyes.

The documentation available about *Il suicidio di un esteta* in the Archivio di Stato, Milan shows that less than two weeks after it was printed, on 15 June 1930, orders were issued for the novel to be seized. The process was catalyzed by an undated letter from a certain Carlo Righetti, who identified himself as a 'padre di famiglia', to the Prefect. Righetti explained that the novel has somehow come into his hands, and denounced it as full of 'passioni pederastiche' which he believed were harmful to Italian youth. Here the institution of the heteronormative family and patriarchal authority are invoked against queer, non-reproductive desire, which threatens to corrupt young people; Italy's future. Righetti probably obtained a copy of the novel from a friend of Ticchioni, showing either that the few copies which did circulate passed swiftly between several hands, or that Ticchioni's friends could not be relied upon to support his work. On 28<sup>th</sup> June, a telegram was sent from the Prefect, Giuseppe Siragusa, to the Chief of Police in Milan, Ludovico de Cesare, ordering the seizure

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<sup>64</sup> London: Virago 1982 [1928].

<sup>65</sup> Elena Biagini, 'R/Esistenze. Giovani lesbiche nell'Italia di Mussolini', in *Fuori della norma. Storie lesbiche nell'Italia della prima metà del Novecento*, ed. by Nerina Milletti and Luisa Passerini (Milan: Rosenberg and Sellier, 2007), pp.99-133 (pp.105-6).

<sup>66</sup> 'Nota dell'editore', in Radclyffe Hall, *Il pozzo della solitudine*, trans. Annie Lami, (Milan: Modernissima, 1930), pp.vii-ix (pp.viii-ix).

of the novel, and requesting that the author, printer and publisher should be notified, and provide four copies. De Cesare issued a Decree the same day, confirming the seizure and stating that the novel was ‘ritenuto turpemente amorale e contrario all’ordine morale della Nazione’. This is a reference to article 112 of the 1926 Laws on Public Security, which forbade the creation and dissemination of texts or images that were deemed ‘contrari agli ordinamenti politici, sociali od economici costituiti nello Stato o lesivi del prestigio dello Stato o dell’autorità o offensivi del sentimento nazionale, del pudore o della pubblica decenza’.<sup>67</sup> No further detail of the specific type of offence was provided, either here or in further correspondence. Citing this law seems to have been sufficient as a justification for the censorship of the novel.

Ticchioni appealed against the decree, with paperwork dated 9<sup>th</sup> July (although received 11<sup>th</sup> July), which I’ll discuss shortly. Then followed two circulars from the Ministry for the Interior dated 12<sup>th</sup> July, signed on behalf of the Minister (Mussolini); the first, to the Prefect in Milan, confirmed the nationwide ban of the book; the second disseminated this information to all Prefects. In a letter dated 22<sup>nd</sup> July from de Cesare to the Prefect, Ticchioni’s appeal was dismissed since it arrived later than the ten days stipulated in article 5 of the Laws on Public Security. Further communications from both the Prefect and de Cesare confirm the banning of the novel; the final document, from the Chief of the Police to the Prefect (but no longer signed by de Cesare himself, as the previous letters were), dated 7<sup>th</sup> August, attests that Ticchioni attended a meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> August. His statement is attached, all copies are ordered to be seized, and the case is closed.

These documents reveal that even before the censorship procedures were tightened up in 1934, multiple copies of texts were being sequestered, the Ministry for the Interior was

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<sup>67</sup> ‘Testo unico delle leggi di pubblica sicurezza’, 18 June 1931, available at:

<http://servizidemografici.interno.it/sites/default/files/RD%2018.6.31%20n.%20773.pdf>

notified, national bans were issued, and paperwork circulated quite swiftly, so that cases were addressed in a matter of days, and resolved in a few weeks. Due process was followed—Ticchioni was allowed to submit an appeal, timelines were carefully respected, and he was given an opportunity to make a statement—although this was rather tokenistic since an unequivocal judgement that the novel was offensive to the nation was made before Ticchioni was given a hearing. Documentation does not indicate who read and annotated the novel, but it was certainly read carefully: there are blue pencil marks on 74 of the 193 pages, and red marks on two pages, perhaps made by a second reader. At times these marks relate specifically to a few lines; at others the entire page is marked as problematic (see Fig. 2). No further annotations are made in this copy of the novel, for example, there are no written notes. Censored passages include: a reference to Umberto's 'bassezze innominabili' (*SE* p.30); a comment that Luciano wanted to devote more time to his 'grande amicizia' with Umberto (*SE*, p.38); Luciano's realisation that he loves his 'friend': 'sentiva di amare Umberto intensamente' (*SE* p.47); a 'bacio lunghissimo' between the protagonists in a taxi (*SE* p.56), and all of the citations that appear earlier in this article that relate to their desire for one another and their games in their love nest.

The annotations do not relate only to same-sex desire, but also to heterosexual liaisons that were deemed to offend public decency, and were also subject to censorship; this includes Umberto's sexual liaisons with Diana (*SE*, p.57) as well as a brief sexual encounter between Diana and an artist who frequented her café, that verges on sexual assault: 'La prese, mentre ella, ancora stordita [...] non aveva saputo ancora rendersi ben conto di quello che faceva' (*SE*, p.15). The next morning, we hear that she is 'carnalmente schiva di colui che l'aveva ghermita' (*SE* p.16), which is also marked up as offensive. References to extra-marital heterosexual sex, and strong female sexual desire for men are deemed to deserve censorship, undoubtedly since they went against the Regime's stance that promoted female modesty,

sacrifice and motherhood, rather than casual sex, but heterosexual flirtations, for example between Luciano and Diana, are not censored. In contrast, all the stages of Umberto and Luciano's relationship are annotated, even those which only speak, obliquely, of 'friendship'. Strikingly, the sections on suicide are not marked up, even though the Regime is known to have sought to conceal suicides since they undermined the image of the 'strong Italian' it cultivated.<sup>68</sup>

Examination of the correspondence reveals that despite the distinction between Platonic and physical same-sex love drawn in the novel, Umberto and Luciano were summarily judged to be involved in 'una relazione omosessuale'.<sup>69</sup> This is despite the fact that explicit sexual acts often associated with homosexuality by the Regime, such as anal sex, did not take place and were not specifically mentioned.<sup>70</sup> This also reveals that while ministers decided not to mention homosexuality in the text of the new penal code, they did occasionally use this precise term in internal documentation, rather than simply noting that material was 'obscene', which was far more frequent.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Paolo L. Bernardini, 'A Culture of Death: Suicide in Italy in the Long Nineteenth Century, 1798-1915', in *Voglio morire! Suicide in Italian Literature, Culture, and Society 1789-1919*, ed. by Paolo L. Bernardini and Anita Virga (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Press, 2013), pp.1- 25 (p.21).

<sup>69</sup> Decree by the Prefect dated 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1930.

<sup>70</sup> Some authorities based their judgement of 'pederasts' on whether they had been anally penetrated. Gianfranco Goretti and Tommaso Giartosio note how men who were arrested on the suspicion of 'pederastia' in Catania in 1939 were condemned to internal exile on the basis of an anal examination: if there were signs that anal sex had occurred, they were found guilty; no effort was made to trace 'active' partners who had penetrated them (*La città e l'isola. Omosessuali al confine nell'Italia fascista* (Rome: Donzelli, 2006), pp.57-8).

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, my discussion of the obscenity trial of Amalia Guglielminetti's *La rivincita del maschio* (1928), a novel that includes group sex and sex between women. The trial documents indicate that discussions of the alleged 'obscene' and 'pornographic' content of this text remained on a very general level (Ross, p.230).

Ticchioni was subject to a police investigation, which may have been standard practice, or have been motivated by suspicions about his sexuality, with a view to condemning him to internal exile. It did not yield any compromising information, and he was deemed ‘di regolare condotta e morale’.<sup>72</sup> This is hardly surprising, since Ticchioni was clearly aware of the importance of destroying equivocal evidence, as confirmed by the section in the novel in which Luciano ‘purges’ Umberto’s room of queer items. Presumably, he would have taken care to avoid detection. It is also possible that Ticchioni was economical with the facts regarding the publishing company, ‘La Bottega di lirica’ and the printing press, ‘La Grafica Moderna’. Ticchioni is listed as the sole proprietor of the ‘Bottega di lirica’,<sup>73</sup> but no other names are mentioned, despite the fact that both companies are registered to the same address (Via Varese 4), and ‘La Grafica Moderna’ seems to have been managed by Giovanni Ciminaghi.<sup>74</sup> Ticchioni may have been protecting a friend.

Ticchioni’s defence of the novel shows him insisting on his status as an upright citizen, and an artist. He claims that any offence to the Nation was unintentional, that his father’s position as President of the Court in Milan had made him extremely sensitive to the importance of maintaining a good reputation, and that he had been seeking to create an unapologetic work of art.<sup>75</sup> In his words, the aim of the novel was to depict ‘una sciagurata

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<sup>72</sup> Letter dated 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 1930 from the Chief of Police to the Prefect.

<sup>73</sup> Communication from the Chief of Police to the Prefect, dated 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1930.

<sup>74</sup> La Grafica Moderna was active between 1926-42. See *Editori a Milano (1900-1945)* ed. by Patrizia Caccia (Milan: FrancoAngeli 2013), pp.160-1.

<sup>75</sup> The personal file on Emanuele Ticchioni held by the Ministry of Justice confirms that he was nominated President of the Court of Milan in 1920, and subsequently serves as a Counsellor at the Appeals Court. He died in January 1929, which may have influenced his son’s decision to publish his novel the following year. All documents are available in the Archivio centrale dello Stato, Ministero di grazia e giustizia, magistrati, 2°

passione umana; senza compiacimento, senza apologia, solo per fare dell'arte e con la sincerità e la verità che l'arte impone'. He frames the narrative as intrinsically hostile to same-sex love, confirmed by the 'moral' judgement in the title and the concluding 'condanna, che la natura riserva ad ogni umana aberrazione'. Here he presumably means Umberto's death. Just as the novel combined contradictory discourses, this defence is both deferential to and challenges the Regime's homophobic perspective, framing same-sex love as 'abnormal', while insisting it is part of human experience and deserves to be represented in the 'true' language of art. Intriguingly, however, there is no attempt to argue that the novel depicts an emotional rather than a physical same-sex relationship, indicating that Ticchioni was aware that there was no point in insisting on this distinction to the authorities. Debates on whether a work of art could be 'obscene' continued in legal and scientific journals in the 1930s,<sup>76</sup> but the succinct verdicts of the Prefect and Chief of Police indicate that artistic merit was irrelevant; subject matter alone was the determining factor. Ticchioni had tried, and failed, to publish his account of a doomed, but 'pure' love.

## CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, due to the absence of further documentation about Ticchioni's life, we do not know if he was friendly with other Milanese publishers who also sought to push the boundaries of the Regime's tolerance, such as Gian Dauli, who established the series 'Scrittori di tutto il mondo' at the 'Modernissima' publishing house, in which the Italian

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versamento, fuori servizio 1905-1935, fascicoli personali, n. 45056. I am extremely grateful to Giovanni Focardi for his generous help in tracking down this information.

<sup>76</sup> Some argued that by its nature, a work of art could not be obscene (A. Sandulli, 'Oscenità e l'opera d'arte', *La scuola positiva*, XV (1935), 37-43), while others countered that what constitutes 'art' is subjective (G. De Maio, 'L'osceno e l'arte nel diritto penale', *Rivista penale*. LXI, 7-8 (1935), 821-38).

translation of *The Well of Loneliness* appeared.<sup>77</sup> Ticchioni was certainly much bolder than Comisso, De Pisis or other authors who waited decades before attempting to publish their homoerotic narratives (and often even then in a self-censored form), although this boldness might have been enhanced by naivety. We also do not know whether he practised ‘oscarwildismo’ or frequented the orgies or queer subcultures alluded to in the novel. One clue is given by the dedication, to a ‘pallido esteta’, a beautiful, much loved but unsullied adolescent male who now lies in the earth, ‘eletta vittima di un altissimo amore’ (9). This may have been a friend or a lover of Ticchioni’s. Like some passages in the novel, this dedication fuses victimhood and death with a kind of triumph—the freedom to choose how and who to love. Ambiguous to the end, it remains unclear whether Ticchioni was seeking to legitimize same-sex practices, or Platonic homoerotic love. However, leaving aside the novel’s insistence on the sexual ‘purity’ of Umberto and Luciano’s relationship, which may well have been an attempt to avoid censorship, and which embroils us in unhelpful discussions about sexual labels, Ticchioni’s attempt to break the pervasive taboo on male same-sex love and to challenge the stigma of queer desire continues to resonate with debates in contemporary Italy, where despite many attempts to propose new laws, there is still no adequate legislation to protect the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual individuals at national level, and the Vatican regularly pronounces against homosexuality.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> On Gian Dauli, see *Storia degli editori italiani*, ed. by Nicola Tranfaglia and Albertina Vittoria (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 2000), pp.363-8.

<sup>78</sup> While there is no national legislation, new laws guarantee some rights to same-sex couples and LGBT individuals in certain regions (including Sicily, see ‘In Sicilia nasce il registro delle unioni civili; maggiori tutele e diritti per le coppie di fatto’, *La Sicilia*, March 4, 2015, available at <http://www.lasicilia.it/articolo/sicilia-nasce-il-registro-delle-unioni-civili-maggiori-tutele-e-diritti-le-coppie-di-fatto>). For comments by the Vatican, see ‘Catachismo della Chiesa Cattolica’, Parte terza, La vita in Cristo, Sezione seconda, I dieci comandamenti, capitolo secondo, articolo 6 il sesto comandamento, 2357. Available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism\\_it/p3s2c2a6\\_it.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism_it/p3s2c2a6_it.htm)

Gnerre, citing Pier Paolo Pasolini's view on the posthumous publication of *Maurice*, wonders whether queer texts that come to light decades after composition have the power to really act on our consciousness.<sup>79</sup> Certainly, Ticchioni's novel is less shocking or provocative today than in 1930, but it can tell us other things, for example about the censorship process, about the painful struggle to negotiate and articulate an 'acceptable' form of same-sex love in a hostile environment, about models of dissident desire, and about mourning. Reading the novel today reminds us that queer sensibilities and communities are forged through many experiences, from the embodiment of dissident aesthetics which mark out sexual 'others' in potentially empowering, disruptive ways, to 'shared experience of social violence',<sup>80</sup> which Ticchioni's novel narrates, and which, unfortunately, persist in contemporary society.

*Il suicidio di un esteta* did not impact widely on readers at the time of writing, and remained almost entirely unknown. Ticchioni was aware that his sympathetic readership was extremely small, as the 'Editor' notes in the Foreword: 'Leggere e sentire questo libro e le sue bellezze è di pochi. Solo il lettore appassionato e la lettrice intelligente capiranno, sapranno giudicare e perdonare.' (*SE*, p.6). What was it that they were meant to understand and pardon? The representation of 'degenerate' same-sex desire, or the representation of same-sex desire as 'degenerate' and socially impossible? Admittedly, Luciano and Umberto's love story is one of disappointment and failure; they do not stand out obviously as queer heroes who fought against sexual oppression. Yet, if his characters were not bold activists, Ticchioni himself can arguably be read as a 'plucky queer [...] heroic freedom fighter',<sup>81</sup> who sought to make a queer story 'narrativizable'.<sup>82</sup> His attempt to breach the taboo on

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<sup>79</sup> P.24.

<sup>80</sup> Love, p.51.

<sup>81</sup> Halberstam, p.150.

<sup>82</sup> Butler, p.43.



homosexuality was perhaps foolhardy, and he did not produce a great work of literature, but it was also a brave gesture to tell a queer kind of 'truth' through art. Censorship has hidden the novel from any broader readership until now, yet despite its obscurity it is a valuable document that can help us to 'acknowledge the losses of both the past and the present',<sup>83</sup> and which encourages us to reflect on the small triumphs of queer failures.

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<sup>83</sup> Love, p.51.